

Abe's visit to a war shrine angers China, South Korea -- and maybe the U.S.



(Photo: Toru Yamanaka, AFP/Getty Images)

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Abe's visit to a war shrine likely to infuriate China, South Korea and maybe the U.S.**
- **Visit to the war-glorifying Yasukuni Shrine is certain to please conservative supporters**
- **Museum associated with the shrine presents a starkly sanitized version of Japan's wartime aggression**

TOKYO — Prime Minister Shinzo Abe marked completion of his first year in office by visiting the war-glorifying Yasukuni Shrine on Thursday, a move that is certain to please conservative supporters but worsen relations with Japan's closest neighbors and rivals — and perhaps even with its most important ally.

"The United States is disappointed that Japan's leadership has taken an action that will exacerbate tensions with Japan's neighbors," the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo said in a statement released Thursday.

Abe had surprised critics since taking office in December 2012 by focusing largely on economic recovery and downplaying conservative issues that had derailed his first term as prime minister five years earlier.

Abe's economic policies had boosted stock prices by more than 50% since the beginning of the year, and had begun to tame deflation and loosen corporate spending. Skillful handling of China's increasing territorial demands and military assertiveness had won support throughout Southeast Asia.

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Even thorny problems with neighboring South Korea appeared to be somewhat mitigated by Abe's quick approval this week of an emergency request for ammunition for beleaguered South Korean peacekeepers in South Sudan.

All that could be undone by Abe's visit to Yasukuni, where 14 "Class A" war criminals are enshrined along with more than 2 million other war dead. A museum associated with the shrine presents a starkly sanitized version of Japan's wartime aggression — views closely associated with Abe and many of his supporters.

Abe has close ties to Japan's conservative, if not nationalist, movement. His grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, was a member of Japan's wartime Cabinet who was arrested for war crimes; Kishi was never charged, however, and later became prime minister.

China and South Korea, which suffered under Japanese occupation, reacted predictably to the Yasukuni visit. Officials in Seoul called it "deplorable and outrageous." China's Foreign Ministry said the move was "absolutely unacceptable" and that Tokyo would "bear the consequences."

"What's most remarkable is the way Abe has just squandered what was really a powerful shift in momentum behind his administration," said Brad Glosserman, executive director of the Pacific Forum Center for Strategic and International Studies, in Honolulu. "He had really seemed to put Japanese national priorities ahead of his own narrow, conservative agenda and now he's managed to undo so much of that."

Glosserman said it will be "infinitely more difficult" now for China and Japan to reach agreement on the tense territorial dispute over the Senkaku Islands, which China claims as Diaoyu, and other quarrels.

In a statement released after the visit, Abe said his intent was to "report before the souls of the war dead how my administration has worked for one year and renew the pledge that Japan must never wage a war again."

The controversy will complicate regional relations, but U.S. goals, as well, says Sean King, an East Asia specialist with the Park Strategies consulting firm.

"This might be just the thing to push South Korean President Park Geun Hye a little bit closer back in China's direction, just as she was presumably pulling away," King says.

The Obama administration has supported Abe's efforts to boost defense ties with the United States, but is likely to be displeased with the controversy. In a pointed message, Secretary of State John Kerry and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel avoided Yasukuni Shrine during a visit in October and instead laid a wreath at a nearby cemetery for Japan's unknown war dead.